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Published in:
International Journal of Intercultural Relations

DOI:
[10.1016/j.ijintrel.2006.06.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2006.06.003)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2006

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kosica, A., & Phalet, K. (2006). Ethnic categorization of immigrants: The role of prejudice, perceived acculturation strategies and group size. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 30(6), 769.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2006.06.003>

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Ethnic categorization of immigrants: The role of prejudice, perceived acculturation strategies and group size[☆]

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Received 10 February 2006; received in revised form 16 June 2006; accepted 27 June 2006

Abstract

People usually perceive immigrants from different national origins as similar to each other, and thus as belonging to a limited number of ethnic out-groups [Sporer, S. L. (2001a). Recognizing faces of other ethnic groups: An integration of theories. *Psychology, Public and Law*, 7, 36–97, Sporer, S. L. (2001b). The cross-race effect: Beyond recognition of faces in the laboratory. *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, 7, 170–200.]. In this study, we examine how host nationals (i.e., Italians) categorize immigrants and how prejudice and perceived acculturation strategies influence this process. In our research, photographs of male faces of members of 16 immigrant groups were shown to the participants ($N = 305$). They were asked to identify the national origin of each person on the photographs. In line with the expected over-inclusion into more numerous and more devalued out-groups, the researchers found that (a) participants who perceived Albanians or Moroccans to be the most numerous, were most likely to categorize immigrants as belonging to these groups; and (b) this over-inclusion effect was most pronounced when participants were prejudiced toward these groups and when they perceived them as wanting to maintain their cultures of origin.

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Keywords: Immigrants; Prejudice; Over-inclusion of out-groups; Acculturation strategies

[☆] This research was supported by a Grant obtained from the National Council of Research in Italy 2002–2003.

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1. Introduction

International migration creates culturally and ethnically diverse societies. As people from different cultures interact with each other, they face not only different belief systems, values, customs, and behaviors, but unfortunately also prejudice towards each other. It seems that social relations between immigrants and local populations often lack cohesion and sometimes show strong antagonism or even racism underneath an outward appearance of tolerance (Cremer-Schafer et al., 2001; EUMC, 2005a, b; McLaren, 2003; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Quillian, 1995; Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002). In political and public debates immigrants are often depicted as trouble-makers. The events of September 11 added further to ethnic tensions. The results of public opinion polls, conducted regularly in the European Union, show a high percentage of people having negative attitudes towards immigrants (ESS, 2002; Eurobarometer surveys).¹ In addition, results indicate that there is a rising percentage of Europeans who believe that there are “too many” non-EU foreigners in their country (Eurobarometer no. 53).² Furthermore, Several studies report that some groups of immigrants, who are typically perceived as most culturally distant, different or deviant, are more devalued and more discriminated against than other groups (Hagendoorn & Hraha, 1987; Hagendoorn, Masson, & Verkuyten, 1996).

Just like other countries in Southern Europe, Italy has, in the course of less than two decades, rapidly and unexpectedly changed from a country of emigration into one of immigration. The public opinion, which initially was one of social tolerance towards immigrants, has become more overtly hostile and xenophobic in recent years (cf., Bonifazi & Cerbara, 1999; Triandafyllidou, 1999). These hostile attitudes have been attributed to a number of factors including the lack of clear immigration and settlement policies, and the inefficiency of the public administration. In contrast to other EU countries, immigration to Italy did not begin in a period of reconstruction and economic development. Rather, it took off during a period of economic recession, characterized among other things, by an increase in unemployment rates. In addition, mass media and some politicians have been accused of being partly responsible for the negative attitudes towards immigrants because of their portrayals of immigrants as being involved in clandestine, illegal and criminal activities (CENSIS, 2002; ter Wal, 2001). A study on the language used in newspaper titles and articles reveals that ‘Albanian’, ‘immigrant’, ‘arrested’, ‘public force’, ‘clandestine’, ‘*extracomunitari*’,³ ‘drugs’, ‘Moroccan’, ‘refugee’, and ‘away’, were the ten most frequently used words to describe migration-related events (Stoppiello, 1999). Such specific national stereotyping is also evident from generic terms lumping together different immigrant populations. For example, ‘*extracomunitario*’, *zingaro* (Gypsy), and *africano/negro* (African/Black) are some of the most commonly used terms in colloquial language referring to immigrants and reflecting varying levels and types of social exclusion.

Stereotype formation and prejudice are based on common cognitive processes, among which the process of social categorization (for reviews see e.g., Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; Stangor, 2000). Categorization has a dual purely cognitive purpose: it provides

¹http://europa.eu.int/comm/publications/booklets/eu_documentation/05/txt_en.pdf

²http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eurobarometer/standard_eb_trend/trend/immigrants.htm

³*Extracomunitario*, means literally non-EU but is used as a synonym for an ‘immigrant from an under developed country’.

useful information that cannot immediately be perceived, and it allows us to ignore unnecessary information. Once we have mental categories, we group stimuli by similarities, downplaying differences between members of a group and exaggerating differences between members of different groups (Tajfel, 1969). Theoretical approaches of social categorization suggest that the distortion and overgeneralization of certain characteristics is inherent in ethnic group stereotypes. As demonstrated by research on social categorization, we tend to rely on readily apparent physical features when initially classifying people (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992). Some of the most universally salient physical features are those based on ethnicity, sex, age, etc.

Various studies have examined the use of information gathering and testing strategies in decision making about group membership (for reviews see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). It was found that people attach varying importance to different categories when categorizing others, so that some categories are more readily accessible and salient (that is, more likely to be used in information processing) than are others. Related to that, there are two types of mistakes an individual can make when identifying social-category membership: to wrongly include an item that is not a member of a given category (over-inclusion); and to wrongly exclude an item that is a member of a given category (over-exclusion).

As early as the 1940s, Allport and Kramer (1946) found a relationship between prejudice and categorization—more prejudiced (anti-Semitic) subjects were more likely to classify pictures of faces as being Jewish than less anti-Semitic subjects (see also Brigham, 1971; Dorfman, Keeve, & Saslow, 1971; Himmelfarb, 1966; Lindzey & Rogolsky, 1950; Pettigrew, Allport, & Barnett, 1958; Pulos & Spilka, 1961; Quanty, Keats, & Harkins, 1975; Scodel & Austrin, 1957). They argued that the prejudiced person must be able to classify everybody as a member of the “good” or the “bad” race or else will experience cognitive dissonance. Similarly, the phenomenon of over-inclusion into negatively valued categories (or over-exclusion from the in-group) is well represented in studies conducted more recently in Belgium (Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Bellour, 1995). All these studies are typically concerned with the categorization of members of a single out-group in relation to members of the in-group. Thus, they do not examine the categorization of members belonging to multiple out-groups in a multicultural setting. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the process of ethnic categorization of members belonging to various out-groups (i.e., immigrant groups), and its relationship with prejudice towards immigrants.

A number of studies demonstrated that it is not so easy to categorize and recognize people along ethnic or racial dimensions. For example, studies on visual stimuli have reported difficulties in ‘recognition memory’ for faces of other races (i.e., the so-called “other-race” effect or more generally, the “out-group homogeneity” effect). People tend to be less accurate in recognizing faces of people of a race different from their own (Alley & Schultheis, 2001; Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner & Weinstein, 2005; Levin, 2000; Malpass, 1981; Malpass & Kravitz, 1969; Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Ng & Lindsay, 1994; Sporer, 2001a, b).

Thus, the identification of ethnic categories is not always obvious when we meet people, especially in countries that are populated by multiple ethnic groups. The immigrant population of Italy is very diversified. There are no predominant nationalities, although the largest national groups of registered or documented immigrants as of 31 December 2002, when this study was conducted, were Moroccans, Albanians, Romanians, Filipinos,

and Chinese (Caritas & Migrantes, 2003). The ten largest national groups represent just over half of the total immigrant population. Most of these immigrants are young people (between 20 and 40 years of age) who emigrated mainly for economic reasons. What we were interested in this study was what would happen when Italians were asked to categorize immigrants into specific national groups. We hypothesized that for some specific national out-groups, an over-inclusion effect could occur, and that this effect might be induced by several factors. We believe that one of the factors that could influence the process of categorization is the objective or perceived group size, i.e., the available information on the number of immigrants belonging to a specific category or group. We know that people form impressions and judgments about social phenomena by using the information that is available in the local context. Thus, they could arrive at an idea about the number of immigrants in general, and about the most numerous groups of immigrants (i.e. perceived base rates) through mass-media and through other sources of information, such as the presence and visibility of immigrants in their neighborhoods or in the workplace. However, several studies revealed the “innumeracy” of host nationals with regard to the statistics of immigration in Western countries (Bonifazi, 1992; Sigelman & Niemi, 2001; Theiss-Morse, 2003). The overwhelming tendency is to overestimate the size of minority populations. This tendency was confirmed in a study that was recently conducted in Italy (Kosic, 2002). The estimated percentages of immigrants in Italy ranged from 1% to 60%. More than three in four participants (78.5%) overestimated the percentage of immigrants in Italy by at least 5%. Only 1 out of 5 participants (19.7%) gave correct estimates (i.e., within a range of $\geq 2\%$ and $\leq 5\%$ around the percentage based on official statistics). In the same study, many participants had inaccurate perceptions of the ethnic composition of the immigrant population in Italy. Looking beyond sheer numbers, people also use other information about immigrant groups in categorization processes. Thus, ethnic categories that are more devalued or more stigmatized, in the sense of being targeted more often and characterized more negatively in public discourse and in the media, are more salient, and hence should be more likely to be used in categorizing immigrants. Thus, it could be hypothesized that people adopt a common-sense heuristic grouping immigrants with unknown or ambiguous characteristics as belonging to one group or to a few groups, which they see as the largest or most salient immigrant groups in the national context. In light of a well-documented association between group size and perceived group threat (Quillian, 1995), the same immigrant groups tend to be both the most numerous and the most stigmatized.

On the basis of previous studies mentioned above, we also hypothesized a significant role of prejudice toward immigrants in the process of ethnic categorization. Building on findings of differential prejudice towards specific ethnic out-groups, which are more devalued and disliked by the host majority than other groups (e.g., Hagendoorn & Hraba, 1987), we expect that, for example, if participants dislike Moroccans, they will rather wrongly perceive and treat a member of any other immigrant group as Moroccan than wrongly perceive and treat a Moroccan as a member of a less disliked out-group. More precisely, we hypothesized that the tendency towards over-including immigrants into the largest or most salient ethnic out-group, will be stronger for participants who are more prejudiced towards this ethnic group.

Finally, we explored the process of categorization of immigrants further by incorporating theoretical approaches from Berry's model of acculturation strategies (see

for a review [Berry, 2003](#)). Specifically, four prototypical acculturation strategies have been proposed (i.e., assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization), which are conceptually derived from the combination of two distinct dimensions of the acculturation process. The first dimension concerns the degree to which immigrants wish to maintain the culture of the country of origin as opposed to giving it up. On the second dimension, the central issue is the extent to which immigrants wish to engage in day-to-day interactions with members of the host majority as opposed to turning away from them. Extending Berry's two-dimensional model of immigrant acculturation orientations to the perception of immigrant groups by the host majority, we expected that the acculturation strategies that are attributed to a specific ethnic group could influence the categorization of immigrants into this group. More specifically, reasoning from the concept of group entitativity (e.g., [Brewer & Harasty, 1996](#)), immigrant groups should be more readily perceived as distinct cultural entities when they are seen by the majority as pursuing ethnic culture maintenance. In turn, the perception of an immigrant group as an entity could make this group category more threatening and hence more salient in processes of ethnic categorization. In parallel, [Bourhis, Moise, Perrault, and Sénécal \(1997\)](#) suggest that more prejudiced people have more often assimilationist or exclusionist acculturation orientations, meaning that they want to exclude immigrants, or they demand that immigrants become similar to the in-group norm in all respects. They argue in their interactive acculturation model that the combination of immigrant separation orientations with host assimilationist or exclusionist orientations predicts problematic or conflictual intergroup relations. Thus, concerning the effect of perceived acculturation strategies we hypothesized that the tendency to over-include immigrants into the largest or most devalued ethnic group would be stronger for participants who perceived this group as more committed to remaining culturally distinct and distant from the host society. Lastly, the association of perceived acculturation strategies with biased categorization may be limited to those participants who are also more prejudiced towards this group. As mentioned above, the perception of culture maintenance in immigrants is likely to reinforce group entitativity in the eyes of the host majority. The relationship between the perception of an immigrant group as a cultural entity and inter-group bias could be moderated by the level of prejudice towards this group. In short, we argued that an immigrant group, that is perceived as numerous and as wanting to maintain the ethnic culture, could be seen as particularly threatening to the majority culture and identity, especially by highly prejudiced individuals. Therefore, perceived acculturation strategies and group size, along with the level of ethnic prejudice, should predict the over-inclusion of immigrants into the most 'threatening' out-group.

Summarizing, we predict (a) that participants will tend to over-categorize immigrants as belonging to the group they perceive as the most numerous, (b) that this over-inclusion effect will be more pronounced in participants with high prejudice toward this group and (c) in those who perceive members of this group as following acculturation strategies aimed at culture maintenance or distance from the host society (i.e., separation or marginalization). Lastly, we predict (d) that the link between perceived acculturation strategies and more frequent over-inclusion may be moderated further by ethnic prejudice. Thus, highly prejudiced individuals, when encountering immigrants with unknown or ambiguous characteristics, will use cognitive heuristics for categorizing these stimuli. These heuristics will make use of the estimated group size and the perceived importance of culture maintenance associated with specific immigrant groups.

2. Study

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and five students (235 females, 70 males) from the University of Rome “La Sapienza” participated in this study. The mean age was 20.52 years ($SD = 2.69$), and they were all of Italian origin.

2.2. Procedure

The participants completed a questionnaire as part of their social psychology course in exchange for extra course credits. They were asked to indicate which group of immigrants they thought was most numerous, and to respond to a series of scales. The scales were measuring ethnic prejudice towards immigrants belonging to the group indicated as most numerous as well as perceptions of their acculturation strategies. When they had completed the questionnaire, we thanked them and announced the second stage of the research. Approximately 1 month later, we phoned the same students and invited them to participate in the next stage of the study, which was conducted in the laboratory at the Department of Social Psychology. Students were divided into groups of approximately 15 resulting in 21 groups all together ($N = 305$). One group was tested at a time. The test involved the projection, in random order, on a white screen of 96 photographs of immigrants, using Microsoft Power Point. We asked participants to identify the national origin of the immigrants whose pictures were shown. It was specified at the beginning of the experiment that the immigrants on the photographs belonged to one of 16 national groups. Their names were provided in alphabetic order: Albanians, Bangladeshi, Cape-Verdians, Chinese, Ecuadorians, Egyptians, Filipinos, Indians, Moroccans, Nigerians, Peruvians, Poles, Rumanians, Senegalese, Somalis, and Yugoslavs. Participants were given 5 s to look at each photograph, followed by 10 s to write down the country of origin.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Perceived group size

We asked participants to indicate which group of immigrants they thought was most numerous in Italy. A variable was created by giving a numerical code to each of the groups chosen. Over 80% of the respondents chose one of the following five groups as the most numerous: Albanians (49.7%), Moroccans (18.4%), Africans (7.3%), Chinese (6.5%), and Filipinos (5.2%). For the next set of analyses we selected only the two national groups that had most often been identified as most numerous: Albanians and Moroccans. Together, these two groups were chosen by 68.1% of the participants. Participants who indicated “Africans” as most numerous were excluded from the study, because Africa is a continent and we had asked participants to indicate national groups. We also did not take into consideration the participants who indicated other groups as most numerous, because their numbers were too small for multivariate analyses.

2.3.2. Emotive feelings towards immigrants

Next, participants were asked to rate their feelings when they saw, met or thought about a person belonging to the group they indicated as the most numerous immigrant group in

Italy, using a 7-point Likert scale. We used a modified version of Dijkster's (1987) scale. Participants were presented with a list of three positive and four negative emotional terms (i.e., seven in total; e.g., admiration, insecurity, distrust). Subjecting the list of emotional feelings to principal component analysis, one bipolar factor emerged, which accounted for 55.03% of the total variance. The internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.86. We reversed the coding of positive terms and created a composite index of emotive feelings, ranging from 1 to 7. Higher scores mean more negative feelings towards the group indicated as most numerous. Participants' mean levels of negative emotive feelings towards Albanians and Moroccans were around the midpoint of the scale, i.e., 3.80 (SD = 1.14) and 3.50 (SD = 1.06), respectively. In addition to this emotional aspect of prejudice we also measured participants' social involvement with immigrants, using a version of Bogardus' scale.

2.3.3. *Bogardus' social distance scale*

The scale consists of seven social situations with varying degrees of intimacy, in which participants were required to indicate their willingness to become involved with members of 16 above mentioned immigrant groups living in Italy. For example, participants were asked to indicate with an "x" if they could accept members of each of these 16 groups as 'tourists', 'classmates at school'/'colleagues at the workplace', 'neighbors', 'friends', 'wives/husbands'; or alternatively if they would prefer to have 'no relation'. In the analysis, we recoded 'x' as '1'. We calculated an index of social distance from members of each immigrant group by summing responses in the five positive categories and subtracting this sum from the negative category 'no relations'. At the end, to avoid negative values we recoded responses on a scale ranging from 1 (small social distance) to 7 (large social distance). Participants' average social distance scores towards Albanians and Moroccans were 4.13 (SD = 2.06) and 3.46 (SD = 1.80), respectively. These mean scores on the whole suggest that most of participants were willing to have some form of social contact with immigrants; they would accept them as colleagues and neighbors but were reluctant to enter into closer relationships (e.g., marriage).

Given the high correlations between measures of emotive feelings and social distance towards immigrant groups (i.e., $r = 0.45$ for Albanian, and $r = 0.57$ for Moroccan), we decided to create a combined index of prejudice toward each of the two most numerous groups of immigrants by averaging the scores on both scales. This new index ranges from 1 to 7. High scores mean high prejudice toward the group indicated as most numerous (i.e., Albanian or Moroccan).

2.3.4. *Perceived acculturation strategies*

Participants rated on a seven-point scale how they perceived the acculturation strategies of the immigrant group they thought of as most numerous, in response to two items:

- (a) Please, evaluate the level of social relationships of immigrants belonging to this group with the host group—ranging from 1 (poor) to 7 (frequent).
- (b) Please, evaluate the level of importance they attach to the maintenance of the culture of origin—ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 7 (extremely important).

Thus, we have two indices, representing the two acculturation dimensions of cross-cultural contact and culture maintenance.

2.3.5. Categorization of photographs

A researcher took a series of color photographs (i.e., of head-and-torso) of immigrants in the streets of Rome and Florence, after they had agreed with the use of their pictures in this research. The subjects on the photographs were all male and approximately of the same age (25–40 years). They belonged to one of the 16 above mentioned largest immigrant groups in Italy. The photographed individuals had neutral facial expressions and they were showing no identifiable ethnic or religious signs or dress codes. Approximately, 10–15 photographs were taken of each national group. A group of seven judges (Ph.D. students in Psychology) selected the six most prototypical photographs of each of the 16 immigrant groups. The study did not include photographs of in-group members; i.e., Italians. This procedure resulted in a total set of 96 photographs. An index of categorization was calculated for each of the 16 immigrant groups by adding up the number of photographs categorized into each group. Given the fact that six photos were shown for each national group, mean scores above six indicate a tendency to over-include immigrants in this category. We also calculated a measure of accuracy in category identification.

3. Results

3.1. Categorization of photographs for each of the 16 immigrant groups

As can be seen from Table 1, participants used Moroccans and Albanians more frequently in categorizing the photographs than any other immigrant group ($F(15, 4464) = 87.74, p < 0.001$). On average, they categorized ten photos as Albanian, or as Moroccan. Since no significant gender differences in the degree of over-inclusion into Moroccan and Albanian groups emerged, gender was not included in subsequent analyses.

The index of accuracy was generally low: on average no more than 23.48% pictures were categorized correctly. Participants' answers were recoded in terms of distortion of the

Table 1

Mean and maximum numbers of photos categorized in 16 immigrant groups, and percentages of accurate categorizations

Immigrant groups	<i>M</i>	Max	Index of accuracy
Albanians	10.1	32	36.83
Bangladeshi	2.3	22	9.33
Capo Verdians	2.8	15	5.00
Chinese	5.8	15	64.5
Ecuadorians	2.2	14	4.00
Egyptians	6.1	20	16.17
Filipinos	6.0	18	35.83
Former Yugoslavians	5.8	20	18.00
Indians	4.9	18	22.17
Moroccans	9.6	29	23.00
Nigerians	5.7	27	31.67
Peruvians	5.6	18	16.67
Poles	7.3	23	34.00
Romanians	6.3	23	20.33
Senegalese	4.9	21	25.17
Somalis	3.0	19	12.33

target face, with values of zero for incorrect answers and values of one for the correct identification of a face as belonging to a member of a specific national group. The highest percentages of correctly recognized photos were found for Chinese, Albanian and Filipino faces.

3.2. Relationships between categorization, prejudice towards most numerous groups, and perceived acculturation strategies

We first ran multiple linear regression for participants who indicated Albanians as the most numerous group ($N = 111$). The number of photographs categorized as Albanian or Moroccan served as a dependent variable. The index of prejudice towards Albanians, and both indices of their perceived acculturation strategies, as well as the interaction of ethnic prejudice with perceived acculturation strategies, were included as predictors.

The regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). As shown in Table 2, we found significant main effects of ethnic prejudice towards Albanians ($\beta = 0.41$) and perceived maintenance of the Albanian culture of origin ($\beta = 0.20$) on the categorization of photographs as Albanian. In addition, the model revealed a significant interaction effect between prejudice and perceived culture maintenance ($\beta = 0.19$).

Simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted to examine the meaning of the interaction effect. The analysis showed that when prejudice was high (1 SD above the mean) there was a significant and strong positive relation between perceived culture maintenance and over-categorization ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$), but this relation was not significant when prejudice was low (1 SD below the mean). These findings are illustrated by the estimated mean values shown in Fig. 1. As can be seen, those participants who were more strongly prejudiced against Albanians and who perceived higher levels of culture maintenance, categorized significantly more photographs as Albanian (as opposed to those with less prejudice against Albanians).

In the second regression, we analyzed participants who indicated Moroccans as the most numerous immigrant group ($N = 58$). The predictors were the same as in the previous analysis. Our model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$). As shown in Table 2, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of prejudice against Moroccans

Table 2

Summary of moderated multiple regression analyses of the number of photographs categorized as Albanians or as Moroccans

Predictors	Beta standardized	<i>p</i>
Prejudice towards Albanians	0.41	0.001
Perceived relationship with the host group	−0.03	n.s.
Perceived maintenance of the culture of origin	0.20	0.020
Prejudice × perceived relationships with the host group	0.02	n.s.
Prejudice × perceived maintenance of the culture of origin	0.19	0.027
Prejudice towards Moroccans	0.64	0.001
Perceived relationships with the host group	0.04	n.s.
Perceived maintenance of the culture of origin	0.14	n.s.
Prejudice × perceived relationships with the host group	−0.02	n.s.
Prejudice × perceived maintenance of the culture of origin	0.25	0.024

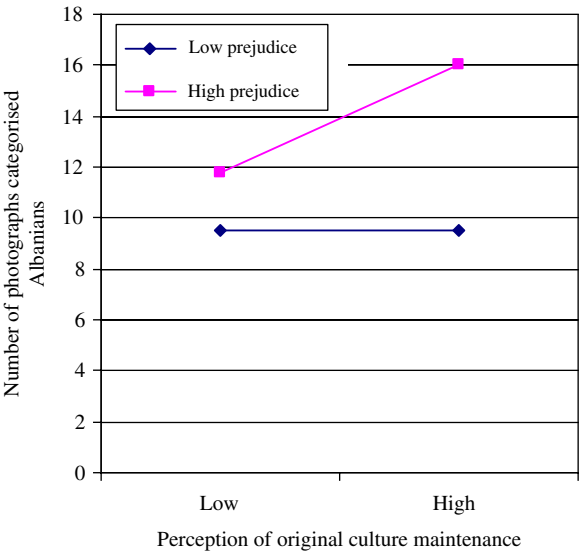


Fig. 1. Mean number of photographs categorized as Albanian as a function of the interaction between prejudice towards them and the perceived maintenance of their culture of origin.

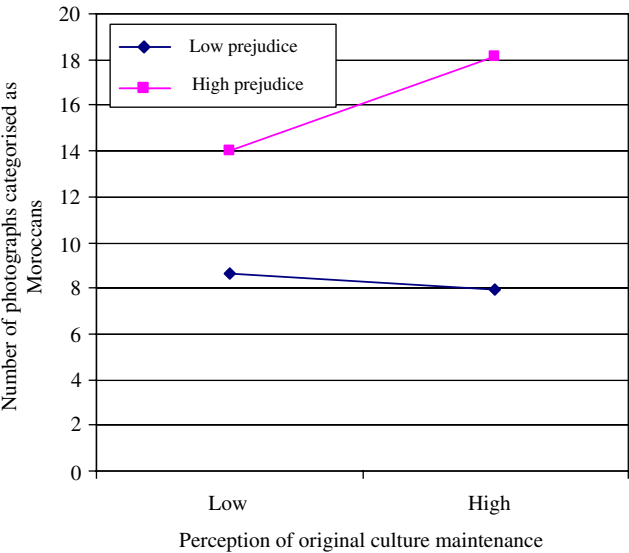


Fig. 2. Mean number of photographs categorized as Moroccan as a function of the interaction between prejudice towards them and the perceived maintenance of their culture of origin.

($\beta = 0.64$) and a significant interaction effect between prejudice and perceived maintenance of the Moroccan culture of origin ($\beta = 0.25$).

As far as the interaction is concerned, simple slope analysis showed that when ethnic prejudice was high (1 SD above the mean) the relation between perceived culture

maintenance and the inclusive categorization of pictures as Moroccan was positive and strong ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.002$), whereas when prejudice was low (1 SD below the mean), this relation was not significant. These findings are illustrated by the estimated mean values shown in Fig. 2. As can be seen, those who were more prejudiced against Moroccans and who evaluated the maintenance of the Moroccan culture of origin to be more important for them, categorized significantly more photographs as Moroccan (as opposed to those with less prejudice against Moroccans).

No significant effects emerged in our analyses for the contact dimension of perceived acculturation strategies, which refers to the degree of social relationships with the host group.

4. Discussion

Like other South-European countries, Italy is a country where immigration is a fairly recent phenomenon. Consequently, Italians still have a limited knowledge of the physical and cultural characteristics of immigrants, who they are, and how many of them live in Italy. Moroccans and Albanians were identified as the two most numerous immigrant groups by our participants. This finding corresponds to official statistical data on the sizes of immigrant groups at the time when the study was conducted. Since Italian hosts have a limited knowledge of statistical data on immigration (Bonifazi, 1992; Kasic, 2002), we argued that estimated group sizes by Italian hosts are not only or even primarily based on statistical data. Rather, the fact that Albanians and Moroccans featured most prominently in the Italian media and public discourse, where they were frequently and intensely negatively stigmatized, added to the salience of these group categories in the public perception of immigrants. Our analyses revealed that host nationals who indicated Albanians or Moroccans as the largest immigrant groups, tended to categorize more photographs of faces of immigrants as belonging to either the Albanian or the Moroccan group. Thus, the category 'Moroccans' was readily applied to all immigrants of dark complexion irrespective of where they come from, be it from Egypt, Morocco, India or Bangladesh, or even from other countries. Similarly, the category 'Albanians' was often used as a general category to group all immigrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Several authors have suggested that ethnic prejudice and discrimination against specific out-groups increase with relative group size (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Quillian, 1995). They argue that sizeable immigrant groups are more visible, and are therefore perceived as a potential threat to the native population in terms of economic and political power. Our findings are in line with the argument that the over-inclusion into the most numerous groups occurred more often among participants with high levels of prejudice towards these groups. In addition, we explored the relationships between the categorization of immigrants and the perception of their acculturation strategies. There emerged a significant relationship between ethnic categorization and the perceived level of ethnic culture maintenance, but only when Albanian immigrants were considered. For Albanian and Moroccan immigrants alike, there was evidence of the moderating role of prejudice in the relationships between over-categorization and perceived culture maintenance. Simple slope analyses revealed that the relationship between the perception of Albanian or Moroccan culture maintenance and the categorization of immigrants as Albanian or Moroccan is significant and positive only for the participants with high levels of prejudice against Albanians or Moroccans. If individuals think that for a large group of immigrants

it is highly important to maintain their culture of origin, they tend to categorize more immigrants in that group than if they do not think so, especially in the case when they have a high level of prejudice towards the members of that group. As expected, individuals with high prejudice towards Albanian or Moroccan immigrants seem to perceive the fact that they do not want to relinquish their culture. Their attitudes are probably based on the belief that the values and traditions of immigrants violate the dominant culture of the host society. As a consequence of their prejudice towards more numerous groups, they tend to over-categorize immigrants as belonging to these groups. In turn, over-inclusion bias inflates the perceived group size and thus exacerbates feelings of group threat. Thus, the over-inclusion effect is part of a vicious circle of biased intergroup perceptions, which perpetuates and reinforces ethnic prejudice against large immigrant groups.

It would be interesting to examine if the same effects are replicated in other cities/countries where other ethnic groups are perceived to be most numerous. Could we expect to find the same effect for groups that are less ambiguous than Albanians or Moroccans in Italy in terms of the category membership of visual stimuli? We wonder also if the same effect could be obtained for ethnic minorities that are not recent immigrants but that share a longer history with the national majority within a country. We would encourage future studies in this direction. Future research could also include the characterization of immigrants in terms of religious belonging in addition to racial visibility—how salient are religious categories and do they create similar biases in the process of ethnic categorization?

A major limitation of this study is that our correlational method cannot tease out the direction of causality of any effect. Hence, we do not know if the actual (or perceived) group size causes the negative evaluation, or if the negative evaluation causes the perceived group size? Therefore, experimental studies of multiple-group contexts are needed.

Another problem with this study is that although the sample consisted of men and women (predominantly women), the task involved identifying the faces of male prototypes only. We did not find gender differences in the process of categorization, but we recommend to take into consideration a more gender balanced sample of participants and photographs in future studies.

Beyond the theoretical contribution that the present study makes to our understanding of prejudice towards immigrants, we believe that our results also have some potentially important social implications. We think that specific attention should be given to understanding and promoting positive images of migration and refugees in education and communication. Furthermore, in light of our findings, we would suggest that more accurate information about the size and composition of immigrant population should be given in the media.

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